

Grande Cuisine



Birgitta Welzel

A play in three acts

ABOUT THIS PLAY

"Grande Cuisine" is a German-language chamber play about three adult siblings clearing out their narcissistic mother's apartment after her death. As they sort through what she left behind and revisit old memories, they discover Edelgard's housebook with secret entries – forcing them to confront the toxic legacy of their childhood.

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

3 acts, approx. 90 minutes - 3 characters (2f, 1m) - Single set – English language

Genre: Psychological chamber play, family tragedy

AVAILABILITY

This manuscript is freely available at the Internet Archive. For performance inquiries, please contact the author. <https://birgittawelzel.weebly.com/>

LICENSE

© 2026 Birgitta Welzel. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).
Performance rights are not covered by this license.

CITATION

Birgitta Welzel. (2026). Grande Cuisine: A play in three acts. Internet Archive.

GRANDE CUISINE

A play in three acts

by

Birgitta Welzel

CHARACTERS

HILLARY (formerly Hildegard), 53, Senior Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, School of Social Science, Princeton.

RAOUL (formerly Rudolf, known as Rudou), 48, her brother, Creative Director at *Self Service*, an avant-garde Parisian design magazine. Artist, collagist.

RUTH-MARIA (called Ru by Hillary and Raoul), 43, their sister, a surgeon at the Charité Berlin.

EDELGARD, recently deceased. The mother of the three siblings, referred to by them in hushed tones as “Edgy” (with a hard ‘g’). Physically absent from the play.

TWO MOVERS

SETTING AND TIME

An old-world apartment in Berlin-Charlottenburg, fourth floor, no elevator. The action takes place in the present day, over the course of 24 hours.

STAGE DESIGN

Edelgard’s apartment. A cluttered still life devoid of composition—too many objects, everything vying for attention. A museum of self-staging. The set presents an open-plan kitchen and living area, divided into two spheres only by a massive kitchen island: here, the clinical, culinary stage of Edelgard; there, the crammed interior of her remaining everyday life.

The kitchen is a performance of French provincialism, featuring cream-white shaker cabinets and dark slate. One can sense an untiring attempt at cleanliness, yet scrubbing is no match for the traces of excessive, greasy cooking. A sticky film coats even the most sterile corners, bearing witness to years of labor at the stove. Rustic coffee mugs hang beneath an upper cabinet—their handles pointing in the same direction with military precision. On the counter sits a heavy knife block; the handles protrude like the bayonets of a guard of honor. Beside it lies a massive notebook bound in saffiano leather, embossed in gold with the words “Grande Cuisine.” It

overflows with stuffed, torn-out magazine pages and handwritten notes that nearly burst the leather.

The center of gravity in the living area is a powerful motorized recliner made of worn, brown faux leather. It dominates the room like an empty throne, yet sits slightly crooked and misaligned. Leaning against the side of the chair is a walking stick with a heavy brass handle. Next to it, a cluttered side table with pillboxes and opera glasses. The rest of the furniture exhales the spirit of “Gelsenkirchen Baroque”: a bulky sofa intended for guests—protected from wear by a woolen blanket spread over it—and a massive coffee table stand somewhat in the background. Kitsch knick-knacks and fake KPM porcelain gather in messy clusters on the table. A massive widescreen television forces its way into the heavy ensemble.

The walls are seamlessly covered with about twelve oil portraits of Edelgard. These gold-framed pictures show the handsome, self-assured woman at various ages between her early 40s and late 50s, painted with an evidently listless brush to look slightly younger than she actually was at the time. In some paintings, she wears distinctive pussy-bow blouses; in others, a snow-white lace apron stands out—the only element rendered with manic precision.

An overflowing bookshelf of unread deluxe editions forms a wall of faux leather and plastic. On the floor, heavy imitation rugs lurk as tripping hazards. An oversized crystal chandelier and various floor and table lamps loom into the ensemble without managing to strip away its coldness.

The apartment door is bolted with massive security locks. Directly beside it on the wall, a cleaning schedule. Turning away from the front door, a dark, tunnel-like hallway opens into the interior of the apartment; the bedrooms and the bathroom can only be sensed beyond it. Large period windows offer a view onto a bleak Berlin backyard.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Autumnal, yet bright and clear morning light pours through the windows. It is about 9:00 AM. The apartment lies still, as if waiting for something. The apartment door is unlocked—several locks click in succession. HILLARY enters. She is dressed in "Intellectual Chic": a structured, ankle-length navy trench coat, over a black oversized turtleneck in heavy cashmere, and sharp-edged, wide-leg men's trousers. In her hand, she carries a large, expensive, yet demonstratively minimalist shoulder bag in soft leather. She stops in the doorway. Stares into the apartment. Takes a step inside. Stops. Her face contorts—the smell hits her like a blow.

HILLARY (softly): Jesus.

She walks to the kitchen island, sets down her bag and coat. The smell is even stronger in the kitchen. She moves quickly to the windows, flinging them all open—one after another, systematically. Fresh air rushes in. She takes a deep breath at the open window. Then, back to the island. She opens her bag and pulls out a thermos. She goes to the hook rack in the kitchen and takes a coffee mug. She pours herself some coffee. Steam rises. She smells it, drinks. She walks through the room, cup in hand. She trips over one of the rugs, catches herself on the bookshelf—the coffee sloshes slightly.

HILLARY (after tripping, breathless): Splendid. (She looks around) Given this obstacle course, that you were killed by the hospital and not by one of these rugs... it's almost... disappointing.

She continues through the room. Stops three meters from the recliner. Observes it, coffee cup in hand. She takes no step closer. Then, she walks in an arc around it—keeping her distance—as if it were electrified. She goes to the bookshelf, takes another sip of coffee. With her free hand, she picks up *Madame Bovary*. No signs of reading. Musil. The same. A shrink-wrapped DVD—Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*. She shakes her head.

HILLARY (to herself): Intellectual stage-dressing.

She takes Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, sits on the sofa with her back to the recliner. She places the coffee cup on the coffee table. From her trouser pocket, the first bars of Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* ring out. She answers the call; her whole body relaxes.

HILLARY: Claire! Sweetie. (Pause) Yes, I made it. The flight was long. (Pause) I'm here. In the apartment. A mausoleum, Claire. Everywhere these—... *tchotchkes*. And the portraits—Rudou's personal torture. (Pause) He's not here yet.

She stands up, paces, staying three meters from the chair.

HILLARY: It's surreal. As if she's still watching. *Very Baudelaire*, as you would say. Only without the poetry. (Pause) But tell me, how is the paper coming along?

She listens, her focus sharpening.

HILLARY: The formation of organic molecules in planetary systems? Fulminant! (Pause, listens) Hm. And where do you see the problem? (Pause, nods) Exactly. Right. It's a sequence, but not yet a causal chain. (Pause) And how would you solve that? (She smiles, listens) Ah! Yes! As an energy problem—too little, nothing happens; too much, everything falls apart. Exactly. That makes the logic compelling. (Pause) And your conclusion? What bothers you about it? (Listens, nods) Right. "Could arise" is too vague. (Listens) Yeah, that nails it! Claire, THAT is the difference between good and excellent scientific writing. You arrived at that all by yourself.

She walks to the bookshelf.

HILLARY: I'm looking at her bookshelf right now. Flaubert, Musil, Plath... all unread. Cultural trophies, in their original packaging. (She picks up the Bergman DVD) Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*—you would cry—unopened. A film about a narcissistic mother. Probably a gift from Ru. Never watched.

She goes to the window.

HILLARY: Do you know what strikes me? You're writing about molecules in space. Millions of light-years away. And I'm standing in an apartment that

smells of old grease. The contrast couldn't be greater. You're writing about spaces without smell. Without a mother. Without guilt. (Lower) That's how it should be, Claire. That's very much how it should be.

Pause.

HILLARY: I'm proud of you. You do work that looks outward. Not inward. Not back. (Pause) I love you. Stay with the stars. Bye, sweetie.

She hangs up. Remains standing at the window.

HILLARY (to herself): Three thousand miles to New Jersey. The best decision of my life.

She turns around, letting her gaze wander over the twelve portraits. Her face hardens.

HILLARY (a whisper): Ru has your eyes. And that... dogged capacity for suffering. (Pause) Fifteen years. And I...

She breaks off. At that moment, the doorbell rings—Westminster Chimes. Hillary flinches.

HILLARY (to herself, with regained coldness): Of course. Big Ben.

She goes to the door. Opens it.

SCENE 2

RAOUL stands in the doorway. A perfectly fitting white poplin shirt, sleeves accurately rolled up to the elbows. A slim cardigan in a vibrant blue hangs casually over his shoulders, sleeves knotted across his chest. Over his arm, he carries a workwear jacket; in his hand, a weekender bag made of leather and canvas.

Hillary and Raoul face each other uncertainly. She extends her arms for a "German" hug. He leans forward for French kisses (*la bise*). They almost collide, laughing stiffly.

HILLARY: Sorry. I forgot.

RAOUL: *Moi aussi.* (He hugs her briefly, firmly) Hillary. *Ça fait longtemps.*

HILLARY: Too long. (She studies him) You look different. GOOD different. Like someone who's getting their life together.

RAOUL (sets down his bag and jacket, takes two steps into the room, stops again): As a matter of fact, I am. (He looks around) *Mon Dieu*. It is... *une nature morte surchargée*. A cluttered still life. No composition. Like a failed collage.

He begins to wander restlessly but gets caught on the edge of a crooked rug runner. He catches himself, looks down, and pushes the corner back with the tip of his toe—tenderly, yet with a touch of arrogance.

RAOUL (A dry snort, half sigh, half laugh): Even the textiles offer resistance. Suddenly he freezes four meters from the recliner. His body tenses. He retreats two steps.

RAOUL (whispering): *Le fauteuil*.

HILLARY: I couldn't get any closer either.

Raoul turns away, almost in flight. He heads toward the portraits. Steps close, retreats. His fingers twitch.

RAOUL: My... masterpieces. (He laughs bitterly) *Regarde*. I painted them to dismantle them. On the canvas, she was controllable.

HILLARY (steps closer, stands beside him): You painted them to please her.

RAOUL (turns to her in a flash): I painted them because she demanded it! (He steps toward the painting again) Look at this neck. A majestic lie in oil. Vertebra by vertebra, I lied the curve away until her neck looked like alabaster.

He steps away from the painting toward the window. He positions himself at an angle to the glass, lifts his right arm, and fixes his gaze on a point in the room—exactly where the easel used to stand. His fingers curl as if holding an invisible brush. His posture is not that of a rebel, but of a highly concentrated, almost devout craftsman.

RAOUL: I stood here. For hours. (He makes a small, searching corrective movement in the air) I didn't paint her. I painted the version of her that made her happy.

HILLARY (coolly, but with concern): You used your brush to lend her an identity in which she could endure herself. Her happiness was your shackle. (Pause) But you're gone now. Paris. (Calculating quickly) For more than fifteen years. A new name. No longer Rudolf, but Rudou.

RAOUL (walking, correcting casually): It's RAOUL now. (Almost like an aesthetic marginal note) "Rudou" was a beginner's mistake. It has this... soft, domestic resonance that you want to shed at some point because it no longer fits. (He looks at her directly) Raoul is the name of a man who shows up to meetings on time. Who meets deadlines.

Hillary studies him searchingly. She forms the name silently with her lips, tastes it, and nods almost imperceptibly: it fits.

HILLARY (precisely, with new weight on the name): Then take the pictures down, Raoul. Free yourself.

Raoul looks at her. Nods. With sudden energy, he begins to take down the portraits. He rips the first one down, leaning it face-first against the wall. Hillary helps him matter-of-factly.

RAOUL (reaches for the sixth or seventh picture, pauses): I still remember how she insisted that I set the light from the left...

He goes to take the picture down, but his gaze is drawn to the kitchen island.

HILLARY (takes the picture down for him): She also insisted that it had to be oil. (Pause) Exclusively oil.

RAOUL (turns to her, a bitter smile): *Bien sûr. L'huile.* (Pause) The pinnacle of art.

HILLARY (also with a small smile): It matched her kitchen.

Short pause. Both look at each other. A moment of shared understanding.

RAOUL (almost laughing): Everything had to be fat. *Regarde.* The only place in the room that doesn't scream for symmetry.

HILLARY: What do you mean?

RAOUL (reaches the kitchen, his hand hovering over the island—between the knife block and the recipe book): This arrangement. The leather, the

wood, the metal... (His hand moves toward the recipe book) This book especially. Textures are protruding from it. This book is not a collection of recipes. It is an... unconscious assemblage.

His hand moves to the "Grande Cuisine" notebook. He touches the leather, turns a page. His fingers glide over receipts, scraps. He is completely absorbed.

HILLARY (takes two steps closer, her gaze sharpening): What is that?

RAOUL (flipping through, fascinated): These layers... everything glued together. Like the formation of sediment made from everyday life.

HILLARY (closer, suspicious): Raoul. What's in there?

She reaches out, grabbing for the book.

RAOUL (closes the book abruptly, too fast): *Rien*. Just... her handwritten recipes.

HILLARY (sharply): Show me.

She reaches for the book again. Raoul retreats, but Hillary is faster, pulling it toward her, snapping it open. She looks at an open page. Her eyes move, reading. She takes a sharp breath through her nose. Her lips press together for a moment.

RAOUL (reaches for the book, taking it out of her hand): Hillary, that is—

HILLARY (lets go, looks at him): That is not a cookbook.

RAOUL (nervously): It's nothing. Just her "Grande Cuisine." (He laughs too loudly) Cassoulet and a control obsession, bound in leather.

Silence. Hillary looks at him piercingly. Then at the book in his hands.

HILLARY (watching him closely): Then why are you hiding it?

RAOUL (defensively): I'm not hiding anything! (He places it back on the island, but turns it slightly away from her) The paper interested me. The material. Nothing more.

Silence. Hillary studies him. She lets it drop—for now.

HILLARY (turns away, pointing to the cleaning schedule hanging between the

kitchen and the apartment door): Did Ru do all this? The cleaning schedule?

Raoul is relieved by the change of subject, strokes the brittle edges of the recipe book one last time, and then follows Hillary's movement. The textures of the room seem to guide him now more than the content of the conversation.

RAOUL: I never asked her... but look here. (He points to the schedule) It's written here. She was here every other day to clean. Probably always straight after her shift.

Raoul approaches the living area by one step.

RAOUL (studying the room): Everything here is so... static. But this paper in the book, it is *précieux*. It reminds me of something.

He runs to the bookshelf. Pulls out the Schwitters book.

RAOUL: Look. I gave her this. Years ago.

HILLARY (surprised): Schwitters? YOUR Schwitters? At Edgy's?

Raoul sits on the sofa with the book, inviting Hillary to sit as well. He briefly shows her a half-healed cut on his left thumb.

RAOUL: From cutting. The blade slipped. (Smiles) Part of being a collagist. (Then gives her the book) I thought she would understand. Collages made from tickets, newspaper clippings. (He flips through, shows her a page) Do you know what Schwitters called "merzen"? (He makes a cutting motion) To cut up. To make something new out of waste. Creating art from what others throw away. (Pause) I thought she would see: I am not a portrait painter. I am someone who picks up tickets. And cuts them up. The knife is my tool. Not the brush.

HILLARY: What did she say?

RAOUL: "Trash." (He laughs bitterly) She said: "So this is what you waste your time on."

HILLARY (sharply, but not cruelly): Of course she said that, Raoul. You were her prodigy. Her heir. The great artist. (Pause) She didn't want tickets. She wanted portraits. Of herself.

RAOUL (hurt): I tried to explain myself—

HILLARY: You hoped she would listen to you. (She brushes his arm almost casually, a gesture of mitigating condescension) It was a beautiful belief, Raoul. But... (she hesitates) ...you couldn't have known better. She placed you so consistently in that ivory tower that in the end, you believed she would share the view with you.

RAOUL (withdraws from the touch): You two never took me seriously. You and Ru. You had your careers—Canetti, surgery. I had... collages. (He laughs bitterly) *Rebuts*. Rubbish.

HILLARY (moves slightly closer): That's not true—

RAOUL: *Si*. It is. (He looks at her) She drove a wedge between us. (He imitates Edelgard's voice) "Your sisters are so pragmatic, Rudolf. So sensible. But you—you are an artist." As if that were a free pass for laziness. (Pause, his voice hardens) And to you two, she said: "Rudolf is too weak. Too dependent. He'll never make it without me." (Looks at her) And you believed it.

HILLARY (after a moment, honestly): You're right. She pitted us against each other. (Pause) You as the impractical one. Ru as the loyal one. Me as the cold one. (She looks at him) She fitted each of us with a fixed costume so we wouldn't get the idea of standing together against her. As long as everyone played their part, she remained the director.

RAOUL (softly): And it worked.

HILLARY: Until now. (She stands up) But the play is over, Raoul. She can't assign us roles anymore. She's dead.

Silence.

RAOUL (also stands up; he reaches for his rolled-up sleeves and pulls the fabric tight on his upper arms): *Bon*. Let's get to it, then. (Matter-of-factly) What are we taking, what happens to the things left over?

HILLARY: We have twenty-four hours. The movers are coming tomorrow. Everyone can choose what they want to keep. The rest will be disposed of.

RAOUL: A moving company? That costs—

HILLARY: I'm paying. (Pause) Ru has hauled enough.

RAOUL: Did she agree?

HILLARY: She doesn't know yet. (She crosses her arms) She'll resent me for it. But she doesn't have to do this as well.

RAOUL: *C'est généreux.*

HILLARY: It's the least I can do. (She looks away) I wasn't here. Neither were you.

RAOUL: *Nous avons fui.*

HILLARY: Yes, we fled. And Ru stayed.

RAOUL (after a moment; he fixes her with a gaze that brooks no contradiction): Hillary, I have something to tell you. Yesterday, when I was on the train, I got a call. From Ezra Petronio, the editor-in-chief, my boss.

Hillary raises her eyebrows. Her posture changes—she straightens up, her gaze sharpening.

RAOUL (notices her reaction, takes a step closer, hands firmly in his pockets. He enjoys the interest on Hillary's face): He wants me, effective immediately, to take over the entire visual department—

A noise at the apartment door. A key is inserted into the lock. Raoul and Hillary turn around.

SCENE 3

The door opens. RUTH enters. She is a younger copy of Edelgard, though with softer, lovelier features. She wears a dark blue wool sweater over a long shirt, tight jeans, a parka under her arm, and a large functional backpack. Visibly exhausted. She stops in the doorway.

RUTH: Hello. (She studies the two of them) The sibling meeting of the lost. Very dramatic.

Hillary and Raoul move toward her.

HILLARY (embracing her): Ru, how wonderful—
Ruth reciprocates mechanically, but not unkindly.

RAOUL (stepping toward Ruth): Ru—
Fleeting French air-kisses.

RUTH (retreating, almost tripping over a rug runner): Rudolf, please. No French theater. (She yawns) I have no energy for choreographed greetings. (She pushes the rug aside with her foot) Sorry. That came out wrong.

HILLARY: How was the shift?

RUTH: Sixteen hours. Two major surgeries. One of them was a pure salvage operation. I'm a zombie. If I bite you, don't take it personally.

She enters the room, avoiding the rugs. She drops her backpack. Stops three meters from the recliner. Stares at it.

RUTH (softly): It still smells like her.

Outside, clouds begin to gather—the light grows duller.

HILLARY (cautiously): You're exhausted. Have you eaten?

RUTH (walks to the kitchen; Raoul retreats): No time. The fridge is empty, by the way. I cleared it out. After... after. Threw everything away, disinfected it.

She leans on the counter, looking at the refrigerator. Raoul's gaze darts to the recipe book—his fingers twitch.

RUTH: It was literally overflowing. The leftovers of her self-staging. Beef lard. Duck liver drowned in butter. Those heavy sauces she'd simmer by the gallon, as if she wanted to concrete us into them. (Pause) It took a while to hammer that into the bin. Hard as plaster.

Hillary exchanges a brief look with Raoul. Both remain silent. Ruth discovers the thermos on the kitchen island.

RUTH (to Hillary): Is there coffee in there?

HILLARY: Mine. But cold.

RUTH: Good. (Pours herself some) Cold wakes you up. (She drinks, grimacing) Tastes like the end of something.

She leans against the counter, cup in hand.

RUTH: So. Here we are. In Edgy's mausoleum. She lived here for more than fifty years. (Pause) And most of it... (She looks around) ...most of it is trash. Or a stage set. (She looks at Hillary and Raoul) What do we do now?

HILLARY: We have one day to decide what is important to us. Everything else must be ready tomorrow at nine. (Pause, lower) For the clearance crew.

RUTH (looks at her, sets her coffee cup down): Of course you organized that. (Pause) A moving company. I'm sure that costs...

HILLARY: That doesn't matter.

RUTH (her voice sharpening): Yes, it does matter, Hillary. We could have done this ourselves. In a few days—

HILLARY: Ru, we have ONE day.

RUTH (bitterly): Everything just goes faster with your money.

Silence. Hillary looks at her.

HILLARY (calmly): That's why Raoul and I are here. To help. Not to... (she breaks off)

RUTH: Raoul. (A tired smile) Not Rudou anymore? (Sighs tiredly. Slaps her mouth once in self-reproach. Pause) Maybe I should get myself a new name, too. (Pause) "Ruthless," perhaps. (Pause. Milder. To Raoul) If you need that name to get through this, then so be it.

She walks through the living room, avoiding rugs, correcting them with her foot. Holding the cup, she moves closer to the recliner—two meters, one meter. Touches the backrest. Sits on the sofa.

RUTH: I'm sorry. I'm not in a good mood.

HILLARY (sitting beside her): You don't have to apologize.

RUTH: Yes. I do. (She drinks coffee) I'm a real joy today.

She stands up, places the cup on the coffee table, walks to the recliner. Touches it. Carefully lets herself fall into it. Hillary is startled. Raoul tenses up.

RUTH (in the chair, taking a breath, bracing herself): What's the news from you two? Hillary, Rudolf?

Silence. Raoul stands motionless.

HILLARY (hesitating): Not much. We're living. Working.

RUTH (without looking at her): Nothing else?

HILLARY (struggling): Claire is writing a paper. On molecular chemistry in planetary systems. She's very good. (She falls silent)

Silence. The light turns grayer.

RUTH: And you? Your work?

HILLARY (evasive): It's going. (Pause) But that's not important right now. (To Raoul) Didn't you have news?

Raoul walks to the counter. He doesn't sit but remains leaning with his back against the slate. He strokes the saffiano leather of the house book lying there almost tenderly, flips it open briefly, lets a newspaper clipping glide through his fingers.

RAOUL: *Oui*. Remember Petronio's call? *J'ai été promu*—I was promoted. At *Self Service Magazine*. He made me the *Directeur de la Création*.

RUTH: What does that mean?

RAOUL (more animated, he straightens up, leaves the book on the counter and looks over the slate at his sisters as if over a lectern): Until now, I was just the Senior Art Director. Someone who delivers. Now, I decide what the world gets to see. My team, the budgets... nothing goes to print anymore without my approval. (He brushes almost casually over a coarse glued spot in the recipe book) I decide now what is art—and what is trash.

RUTH (nods mechanically): Sounds important.

HILLARY (with new attentiveness): Sovereignty over the selection. That's a considerable leap, Raoul.

RAOUL (straightens up even more): And I'm making good money. (He laughs softly) No more dependency.

Ruth looks at him. Her face hardly changes. But something tightens. She sits

up straight in the chair, moving toward the front edge.

RUTH (very calmly): Dependency. (Pause) Yes. That's good. That you don't have any anymore.

HILLARY (sensing something, stands up): Ru...

RUTH (slowly stands up from the chair, ignoring Hillary): How long were you dependent? On her?

RAOUL (uncomfortably, sets the recipe book aside): Ru, I've been in Paris for seventeen years. I earn my own money.

RUTH (sharper): That's not the point. (Pause) You moved out at thirty. Rudolf, thirty! You came back here after university and lived with her. Off her money.

RAOUL (stiffening): I then went to Paris to survive. (Pause) And since I've been there, I've earned every cent myself. Every single one.

RUTH (nods slowly, walks to the window, back to them): I was nineteen when I ran away from this apartment. Right after school. (Pause) I scraped together the money for my first flat in smoky dives. Spent nights lugging trays. For ten years. (She turns around, looks at both of them) You two could study right away. (To Hillary) Zurich. (To Raoul) Merz Academy. With her blessing. With her money. (Pause, bitter) I did NOT want to take that money. None of it. My pride was the only thing I had back then. So I waited until I could fund my medical studies myself. On my own strength. (Her voice almost breaks) And then I began to take care of her. While I was still waitressing.

It becomes significantly darker—thick clouds.

HILLARY (moves closer to Ruth): That's not Raoul's fault—

RAOUL (stands up, takes the recipe book under his arm): Ru, I understand—

RUTH (interrupts, coming closer): Do you? Really? (Pause) Do you know what I was doing just the week before last? After a six-hour gastric resection?

HILLARY: What?

RUTH (cheerful, almost amused): I came here. And I sharpened the kitchen knives. (She points to the kitchen) All of them. With the whetstone. For an hour.

Raoul involuntarily retreats half a step, his hand goes to the house book under his arm, holding it tighter.

RAOUL: *Pourquoi?*

RUTH (laughs): Because Edgy demanded it. (Imitating) "Ruth-Maria, you're the one with the fine fingers. You're cutting meat all day at the clinic anyway—surely you can do the knives for Mama." (Pause) In the OR, I save lives with millimeter-work on tissue. But for her, I had to sharpen kitchen knives. (She walks to the knife block, touches it) For her hostage-taking through heavy sauces. That's how she held people. Not with words. With butter. With suffocating care.

HILLARY (coming closer): That's... that's absurd.

RUTH (turns to Hillary): Absurd? (She laughs hollowly) The knives were at least made of steel. They were harmless. (She paces) Do you know what was really absurd? Her toenails.

RAOUL: *Quoi?*

RUTH (stops): They were like weapons. Ingrown. Hard as encrusted resin. (She stands still and stares at her hands) She wouldn't let a stranger touch her feet. (Bitterly) So I had to do it. Every second Sunday.

Silence. The light is now gray, almost gloomy. No one turns on any lamps.

RUTH (becomes theatrical, but with rage underneath): And her teeth! (She laughs) Partial denture. Poor fit. But go to the dentist? No. (She comes closer) So I had to treat her pressure sores. Clean her gum pockets. Without gloves—she didn't want "rubber on her tongue." (More intense, even closer) And she's lying there (points to the chair) with her mouth wide open, and I'm working in the jaws of the wolf.

RUTH (almost screaming): And do you know what she said? Every time? (Imitating bitterly) "Is this what you studied so long for, Ruth-Maria? To wipe the rot out of your mother's mouth?" (Broken laughter) And then she

laughed. As if it were a joke between the two of us.

Long silence. Hillary stares at her hands. Raoul briefly closes his eyes. Both are breathing heavily.

HILLARY (whispering): My God.

RAOUL (turns away as if he might retch. Pauses for a moment and turns back to the sisters): *Quelle horreur...* What a singular, lifelong embarrassment that woman was!

Ruth and Hillary look at him.

RAOUL (softly, haltingly): Adolescents are ashamed of their parents... that's normal. But with me... it was a permanent state. At fifteen, at twenty, even years after university. (Pause) When friends came to pick me up, I waited in my room. Paralyzed with fear that she would appear in the hallway. And when she did stand there... (Softly) In those moments, I just wanted to be invisible. For the floor to swallow me up, so no one would see that I belonged to her.

RUTH (a sharp laugh): You wanted to be invisible? You succeeded, Rudolf. You were gone. (Colder) And where were you? (Closer) In Paris. Far enough away that you didn't have to witness the misery here.

RAOUL (defensively, the recipe book almost slips, he catches it): I went there to survive—

RUTH (cuts him off): To survive? (Bitterly) I survived HERE. In disgust. (She points to the chair) I paid in kind. In years of my life. (Pause) You took your freedom. I paid for yours.

RAOUL (retreating): Ru, that's not—

RUTH (follows him slowly): Yes. It's only fair. (Her voice becomes hoarse) You could only leave because I stayed. Do you understand that? Someone had to be here. (Pause) And that was me.

HILLARY (carefully steps between them): Ru, please—

RUTH (to Hillary): Leave me. (Back to Raoul, lower but cutting) We both know how the game went. You were her beautiful showpiece in the distance. The artist in Paris. And me? I was the tool here in the dirt. The

caregiver. The one no one sees.

She walks to the chair. Her gaze falls on the walking stick leaning there. She grabs it, firmly, with both hands, and lifts it up.

RUTH: Do you know what this stick was? (She holds it like a barrier between herself and Raoul) Her grappling hook. That's how she pulled me in. "Ruth, do this, Ruth, support me." (She clenches her fists around the handle) Every time I was within reach and she wanted something from me, she pulled me to her with this. There was no escape. I wanted to... break it so many times. But now I'm holding on to it, aren't I?

She suddenly looks down at the stick in her hands. The gray light reflects on the polished knob. Her knuckles are white. She stares at the thing as if it were glowing or burning her. An expression of deep loathing—for the stick and for herself—crosses her face. She drops the stick.

RAOUL (retreating toward the bedroom hallway, voice barely audible, recipe book tucked firmly under his arm. The book seems like something he took by chance, a shield): I... I can't do this... *Je ne peux pas...* (Pause, he breathes shiveringly) I'm going... to my old room. I have to see if there's... if there's anything I want to save. Before the apartment is cleared.

While he disappears into the darkness of the hallway, RUTH stands motionless. HILLARY is three meters from her. The room is almost dark—only faint contours in the gray light. The recliner thrones untouched, powerful. The coffee cups forgotten on the coffee table. The walking stick on the floor. No one turns on a light.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

The room lies in almost total darkness. Only two faint spotlights—one on HILLARY, who is still sitting on the sofa, one on RUTH, standing at the window, five meters away. Rain drums against the panes. The recliner is a dark mass between them. A long silence.

RUTH (without turning, facing the window): He's not coming out, is he?

HILLARY (two meters behind her, in the semi-darkness): Give him time.

RUTH: Time. (She laughs bitterly) Yes. Time. That's something we have, isn't it? Twenty-four hours.

She turns and walks toward the kitchen—four meters from Hillary. The spotlight follows her weakly. She leans against the island. Beside her is the large knife block made of dark wood.

RUTH: I shouldn't have said that. About... (she breaks off) He didn't free himself at my expense.

HILLARY (stands up, moves two meters closer, the spotlight follows her weakly): He knows you're exhausted.

RUTH: That's no excuse. (She goes to the cleaning schedule, touching the yellowed paper) Every other day. Monday: wipe the kitchen, scrub the stove. Friday: the knives.

Without noticing, she takes a step toward the knife block.

RUTH: They always had to be razor-sharp. (Pause) As a child, I watched her for hours.

HILLARY (moves a meter closer, calmly): Show me.

RUTH (walks to the knife block, pulls out a knife—slowly): She was cutting beets. (She holds it, observing the blade) Mountains of them. For her *Berliner Salat*. (Pause) I watched. How the knife went through the flesh. How the red juice ran over her hands. (She puts the knife back) It looked like

blood. Blood everywhere.

HILLARY (very softly): Ru...

RUTH: I was fascinated. And horrified. (Her voice becomes more matter-of-fact, clinical) As a surgeon, I see real blood. (Pause) In the OR, I cut with millimeter precision. Save lives. (Her voice hardens) But then I'd come here. After six-hour surgeries. And I'd have to sharpen kitchen knives. (She walks away, three meters of distance) For beets. (She laughs hollowly) For her heavy sauces.

Silence. Only the rain.

RUTH (lower, turning away): But there were other moments, too. (Her voice softens) Not many. But... they were there.

HILLARY (carefully moves two meters closer): What do you mean?

RUTH (turns around, her eyes glistening): Once—a few years ago—I came here after a shift. We'd had a child on the table. A routine procedure. But then an artery tore. (Pause) We couldn't get the bleeding under control. (Pause) And when I arrived here, completely empty, she had made tea. My favorite tea. Chamomile.

She smiles weakly.

RUTH: And she said: "Sit down, *Rüthchen*. Drink this." (Her voice breaks) Not Ruth-Maria. *Rüthchen*. (Pause) And then she just let me be. Ten minutes. And when I left, she said: "You are a good doctor. The child had no chance. But you tried. That's what counts."

Traces of tears run down Ruth's face. Hillary's hands clench.

RUTH: Do you understand? She saw me. In that moment, she truly saw me. (She wipes her eyes) And then I think... maybe it wasn't all for nothing. Maybe she did... (she cannot finish the sentence)

HILLARY (visibly struggling with herself, taking a step, her voice becoming sharp, almost panicked): Ru, be careful. That is the most dangerous moment of all. When the authority that has kept you down for years suddenly opens its fist and strokes your cheek. That one second of false motherliness... it's enough to buy you for another ten years. It makes you forget everything that

came before.

RUTH (freezes, her voice turning sharp): This is your Canetti again, isn't it?
Crowds and Power.

HILLARY (takes a step toward her): It's the truth, Ru. He writes that the mercy of the despot is only the ultimate form of his violence. Because afterwards, you are grateful to him. Because you submit to him voluntarily.

RUTH (turns sharply): Stop it! I don't need a writer to explain to me how the death of a child feels! Or how chamomile tea tastes!

HILLARY (desperately): It's not about the tea—

RUTH (comes closer, almost touching): You and your books! Do you know what she called you? "The clever girl with the paper heart." (Pause) "Ruth-Maria," she said, "the two of us, at least we still bleed. But your Hildegard... she hides behind her pages so she doesn't have to feel how empty she is inside."

HILLARY (retreating—one meter): I know—

RUTH (following her): She held you up to me as a warning! "Do you want to end up like your sister? So out of touch with the world?" (She laughs bitterly) But at the same time, she preferred you. The educated one. The first in the family with a PhD. (Pause) And I was the stupid one. The loyal one. The one who stays.

HILLARY (defensively): I never—

RUTH (almost screaming): She played us against each other! And it worked! I hate your books! I hate that you always know better!

Silence. Hillary stands there, stung.

HILLARY (her voice strained, almost breaking): You call it "knowing better." For me... (She struggles for words) ...for me it is... I can't... (Pause) Canetti isn't an escape. It's a weapon. My most powerful one. If you take that from me... then I'm just that child again, sitting at the table and... and waiting for... (she cannot speak further)

RUTH (bitterly): A weapon. It's a wall.

HILLARY (very softly): No. (She moves a step closer—one meter) So that I have a voice. One that she couldn't... (her voice breaks) ...one she couldn't take away from me.

RUTH (confused): What?

HILLARY (struggling with words, her posture stiffening, then she slowly sinks to the floor in front of the kitchen island): She forbade me to speak. I was eight. Maybe nine. I had read a book and wanted to tell her about it. I was enthusiastic. And she... (her voice hardens, imitating Edeldard) ...she looked at me, put down her spoon and said: "That's enough now, Hildegard. Better be quiet. You try so hard to act clever, but it's tedious to listen to you. Do us all a favor and just shut up. Then no one will notice how little you actually have to say."

RUTH (staring at her): What?

HILLARY: And I believed I was stupid. (Pause) So I fell silent before her. Forever. (She looks at Ruth) Only: "Yes, Mother." "No, Mother." (Pause) School was my salvation. I was allowed to talk there. (Pause) And then, at fifteen, I read Canetti. *The Tongue Set Free*.

RUTH (also sinks to the floor—a meter and a half from Hillary, leaning her back against the kitchen island): What does it say?

HILLARY: He writes about his childhood. About the threat. That they would cut out his tongue if he spoke a forbidden language. (Pause) Whoever controls the tongue, controls the person. (She looks at Ruth; her voice grows firmer) And then I understood: I am not stupid. My mouth was only forbidden because my thoughts... because they were a threat. (Pause) Canetti saved his tongue through writing. I saved mine through reading. Through every book I didn't mention in front of her. (She looks directly at Ruth) That's not an escape, Ru. That is... that is the voice she couldn't suffocate.

Long silence. Ruth stares at her.

RUTH (whispering): The tongue set free.

HILLARY (nods): Yes.

RUTH (stands up, bracing herself against the island, her hand finds the knife block): She threatened me too. With my tongue.

HILLARY (also stands up): What?

RUTH (touches the knife block, her hand trembling. Then her voice suddenly becomes higher): I was four. Or five. You were already in school. There was liver. (She contorts her face in disgust, shudders strangely) Those gray rags that smelled of... of a musty cellar. I pressed my lips together so hard it hurt my whole face. (She presses her lips together, shakes her head like a defiant child) *Mmm-mmm!* I thought if I just stayed firm enough, she couldn't force me.

Ruth's playful defiance breaks abruptly. Her hand closes around the handle of the knife. She pulls it out slowly. The metallic scraping is the only sound in the room.

RUTH: And she took a knife. (She holds it, staring at it) One like this. (Her voice becomes toneless) And she said: "If you don't open your mouth, Ruth-Maria, then I'll cut off your tongue. You obviously don't need it. And then I'll pour the food directly down your throat."

HILLARY (freezes, an arm's length from Ruth): No. No—

RUTH (holding the knife, her hand trembling): I screamed. I opened my mouth. And she stuffed the food in. Bite after bite. While I gagged. (She laughs, but it is broken) And then she put the knife away and said: "See? It wasn't so bad after all."

She thrusts the knife back into its block. The blade bites into the wood with a metallic snap.

HILLARY (steps very close, tears in her eyes): My God. Ru... I didn't know... I knew nothing about that.

RUTH (looks directly at Hillary): I knew that you weren't there and I was alone with her. But I was five. I thought you were the big sister. I thought you'd feel it anyway. That you'd drop everything and save me.

HILLARY (softly): Ru, I couldn't...

RUTH: And when you came home, you walked right past me without a word.

Door shut. Book open. I thought you had seen it and didn't care. (Pause) In that moment, I believed her. That you were made of ice. (Pause, bitterly) And then you started lecturing me with your clever sentences. As if I were too stupid to grasp what was happening here.

HILLARY (softly, but firmly): I didn't want to give you lessons, Ru. I wanted to give you words to shield you. I thought if you named things the way they were in my books, they would get smaller. I wanted to show you how to bolt the door in your mind from the inside. So she couldn't get to you anymore.

RUTH (a dry laugh): You could lock the door. But I was sitting at the table. I had the taste of metal in my mouth and her right in my face. There was no "elsewhere."

HILLARY (steps within touching distance): I know. I threw my sentences at you like lifebuoys, but you couldn't reach them. I wanted to save you, but I only made you lonelier. I wanted you to be in a safe place, at least in your head. Like I was.

RUTH (looks at her for a long time): You created that place for yourself, Hillary. A territory where she had no entry. (She points to the knife block) I stayed down here. In the matter. In the tendons and the tubers. (Pause) We both survived. Just in different wars.

HILLARY (nods, unable to speak).

RUTH (observes her hands; they are completely still now): I saved my tongue differently than you did. Not through sentences. But through this.

She makes a minimal, precise movement with her hand, as if making a fine incision.

RUTH: Every time in the OR, when I take the scalpel, I reclaim my life. I am the one who decides where the cut goes. I use the knife to heal. Not to destroy. That is my revenge. And my salvation, Hillary. That my hands preserve life now, while hers only sowed fear.

Hillary reaches for Ruth's hand. Ruth lets her. They stand there in the faint light by the kitchen island—their hands joined, both weeping.

RUTH (whispering): We both survived. Each in her own way.

HILLARY (can only nod).

Long silence. Only the rain. The knife block between them—a silent monument.

SCENE 2

A sound comes from the dark hallway leading to the bedrooms. A door opens softly—the creak of old hinges. Both sisters freeze. Their hands do not let go. They listen. Silence. Three seconds. Only rain. A light switch clicks. Light comes on in the hall—yellow, dingy. The glow falls through the open hallway door into the dark living room, casting a wedge of light onto the floor. The sisters are faintly illuminated by this light—their faces half in shadow.

HILLARY (whispering, without taking her eyes off the hallway): He's coming back.

RUTH (whispering): Yes.

Steps are heard on the floorboards, moving within the hallway toward the bathroom. A faucet is turned on. The sound of running water, then the vigorous rubbing of hands. The faucet is turned off. Water rushing in the pipes.

HILLARY (whispering, urgently): Ru. I think Raoul found Edgy's diary.

RUTH (turns to her, whispering): What?

HILLARY: The recipe book. Raoul was touching it the whole time. (Pause) I think she wrote in it. About us.

Ruth inhales sharply. Silence. Five seconds.

RUTH (whispering, intensely): A diary?

The steps in the hallway set in motion again—approaching the living room directly. Slowly. Hesitantly. The floorboards creak with every step.

RUTH (whispering, her gaze hardening, fixed on the shadow): We confront him. Together.

HILLARY (nods, also watching the shadow): Yes. Together.

They let go of each other's hands and turn toward the hallway. RAOUL enters the living room. The yellowish light behind him turns him into a silhouette, but a faint spotlight from above now catches his face. He freezes two meters in front of them. He sees the traces of tears, the red flushing of their faces, their united front. He registers that they have been waiting for him. His fingers dig deeper into the cover of the recipe book.

RAOUL (searching for words, breaking the silence almost immediately): *Pardon*. You've... (his gaze wanders back and forth between their faces) ...been talking?

Silence. The sisters do not answer. Just stand there, united.

RUTH (takes a step toward him): The book.

RAOUL (too quickly): *Quoi?*

HILLARY (advancing as well): You took it. From the kitchen. Why?

RAOUL: I... I was just looking at it. The paper. The handwriting—

RUTH (interrupting): Don't lie. (She fixes her gaze on the book under his arm) Hillary saw that you discovered something in there.

HILLARY: Those aren't recipes, Raoul. There are entire paragraphs. Closely written pages.

RAOUL (retreats a step, pressing the book tighter to himself): It's nothing important. Just old notes—

RUTH (cutting him off): Stop it! You found something. Something about us.

HILLARY: What did she write?

Silence. Raoul looks from one to the other. He is surrounded. He exhales shiveringly; his shoulders sink.

RAOUL (softly): *D'accord*. (Pause) You're right.

He sets the book down, exhaling deeply.

RAOUL (opens the book, flips through, not showing it to them but turned only toward himself): It starts as a cookbook. Recipes. For her own use, for

others. (He flips further) But then come... logs. Of whom she cooked what for. How people reacted. (Pause) What she thought about the people.

HILLARY: About the people?

RAOUL (nods): About the sisters-in-law. About the neighbors.

Acquaintances. The pastor. (He flips) Who came for coffee, what she served, what the guests said. And then... what she really thought of them.

RUTH (her voice becoming urgent): About us?

RAOUL (shakes his head, flips further): Not yet. (He pauses) That comes later. (He flips more slowly) About twenty years ago, it becomes... different. No longer just logs about guests. More like... (he searches for the word) ...like diary entries. About her life. (Pause) About us.

Silence. Only the rain.

RUTH (whispering): I want to see it.

HILLARY / RUTH (simultaneously): Show us.

RAOUL (holding the book tight, hesitating): Are you sure?

The sisters look first at each other, then back at Raoul. A wordless agreement.

RUTH / HILLARY (as if with one voice): Yes.

Raoul nods slowly. He hands the book to Ruth. She holds it for a moment like a heavy, dangerous artifact against her chest. She looks at the dark coffee table, then at Hillary and Raoul. As if following an invisible starting signal, they fan out. Ruth switches on the first floor lamp—a warm gold breaks the darkness. Raoul moves to the second lamp in the background. Hillary to the third on the window side. Their movements in the room are fluid, their choreography of making light almost ritualistic. It is the first time the three siblings act together without conflict. The room is now fully lit. The shadows are pushed into the corners.

RAOUL (softly, stepping back): *Voilà.*

Ruth goes to the coffee table and sits on the floor. Hillary and Raoul follow her on the left and right. They form a closed circle around the book.

RUTH (opens the book, flips): 1974. Recipes. (She flips further) 1985... here it begins.

She reads silently, then aloud:

RUTH: "October 14, 1992. *Königsberger Klopse* for Pastor Wegner. He said my sauce was a comfort in lean times." (She reads on) "Quite unlike his wife. Thin as a communion wafer—one wonders where she fits the Holy Spirit, being so entirely without padding. I told the Pastor upon leaving that I would pray for his wife, because of her..." (she hesitates) "...apostrophy of the soul."

Silence. Then Raoul snorts.

HILLARY: She means atrophy.

RAOUL (laughing): Apostrophy of the soul!

All three laugh—briefly.

RUTH (flipping, still smiling): Here. 2018. (Reads) "Foie gras pâté for the bazaar. The bank director's wife asked about my heritage. I mentioned casually that my great-grandfather personally fed the Czar's hunting dogs with liver."

Ruth looks up briefly.

RUTH: He was an apprentice grinder in a cutlery factory in Solingen.

RUTH (continues reading, shaking her head): "The director's wife said: 'But Edelle, that is a royal heritage!' I told her such recipes were a true coryphée of our family."

RAOUL (clutching his stomach with laughter): "Edelle"? She really had people call her "Edelle"?

HILLARY (laughing along): Like a French duchess from the suburbs. And then the "coryphée" right after... God, she was insufferable.

All three laugh loudly, liberated.

RUTH (reading on): "Ruth stood nearby and just rolled her eyes again—that crow."

Ruth's laughter dies. She stares at the page.

RUTH (lower): Crow.

Hillary places her hand on Ruth's shoulder. Silence. 15 seconds. Only the rain. Ruth closes the book slowly.

RAOUL (softly): Maybe we should—

RUTH (interrupting, her voice firm): No. (She pushes the book to Hillary) You read.

Hillary takes the book. 5 seconds of silence during the hand-off. Flips.

HILLARY (reading, matter-of-factly): "No one actually reads Hildegard's papers. People just nod politely."

Silence.

HILLARY (flips, reads): "Rudolf is my eternal suckling. God denied him the strength to be a man."

RAOUL (whispering): Suckling.

Ruth and Hillary look at each other.

HILLARY (flips, finds something about Ruth, reads): "Ruth is basically just the assistant in a white coat. She holds the bowls and hands over the cutlery. You can't make a racehorse out of a dray horse."

Hillary's hand twitches toward Ruth—but doesn't touch her.

HILLARY (her voice becoming analytical): She is attacking our core identities. Your work. Raoul's masculinity. My research.

Hillary flips further. Finds something. Her face changes.

HILLARY (reading softly): "Ruth mentioned today that Hildegard already looks quite spent when she laughs, with wrinkles around the eyes. I had to rebuke her. For a young woman to look so uglily at superficialities is a shame."

Silence. Ruth stares at Hillary, stunned.

RUTH (whispering): I never said that. I only said you looked tired.

HILLARY (doesn't look up, her voice trembling): She told it to me as a warning. That you were making fun of my "premature aging" because you

envied me. (She turns the page, continues reading)

RUTH (her voice growing firmer): She used me. To hurt you. (Pause, looking briefly at Hillary) That is triangulation! She took my sentence, dipped it in poison, and waited for it to eat you away.

Hillary moves her hand toward Ruth's, then pulls it back.

HILLARY (flips, reads): "Hildegard finds Ruth's loyalty to me 'pathological'. She calls it 'co-dependency'. Ruth cried when I told her about it."

RUTH (brief intense look at Hillary, then bitterly): Triangulation in both directions! She tells you something about me, and me something about you. She turns me into a malicious brat in your eyes and you into a heartless diagnostician in mine.

HILLARY: She positioned us against each other.

RUTH (her hand briefly touches Hillary's—lets go again): And we believed it. Every single word.

Silence. Hillary flips further. Finds something.

HILLARY (reads): "Told Rudolf that Hildegard calls him a 'dilettante'."

Raoul looks at Hillary.

HILLARY (quickly): I never said that. Raoul—

RAOUL (his voice is empty): But you thought it.

RUTH (her voice becoming rationalizing): Raoul, don't you understand? Edgy systematically lied. (Pause) But you were with her. Every day. You saw how she manipulated.

RAOUL (looks at both of them): What are you trying to say?

RUTH: You lived with her. Every day.

HILLARY: You saw how she prevented us from being on the same side.

RUTH (her voice growing firmer): That makes you... an accomplice. (Casts a brief look at Hillary) Structurally.

RAOUL (whispering): An accomplice?

HILLARY: You maintained her system by staying.

Raoul stares at both of them. His voice breaks:

RAOUL: You don't take me seriously.

He reaches for the recipe book. Hillary tries to hold on to it, but he pulls it to himself.

RAOUL (flips, finds something, reads): "What Hildegard writes is so full of heavy air. Poor, empty child."

HILLARY (reaches for the book): Raoul, don't—

RAOUL (raises a hand dismissively toward Hillary, flips, reads): "Ruth's envy of Hildegard is eating her up. She knows she will never have her sister's intellect."

Ruth retreats.

RAOUL (finds something, his voice becoming triumphant): "Told Ruth that Rudolf should finally grow up. Ruth thinks I should have handled him more firmly."

He looks at Ruth.

RAOUL: Did you say that?

RUTH (hesitating): I... maybe I mentioned—

RAOUL (reads): "Ruth called Rudolf a 'parasite'. Quite coldly she used that word."

Silence.

RAOUL (his voice becomes low): Parasite.

RUTH (defensively): That was in a different context—

RAOUL (flips, reads faster): "Hillary sent me a book about 'toxic families'. She only sees Rudolf as a 'textbook case' now."

He looks at Hillary.

RAOUL: A textbook case. I am to you... a case study?

HILLARY (struggling): I sent her a book, yes. About narcissistic systems. But not to diagnose you—

RAOUL (interrupting): You analyzed me. Like an insect.

HILLARY (her voice turning cold): That isn't fair—

RAOUL (screaming): FAIR? You sit there with your titles and ask why I didn't leave?

RUTH (stands up): Because you could have! Like we did!

RAOUL (also stands up, desperately): WITH WHAT? (He points to the book) After the academy, I came back because I didn't know how to open a bank account! How to fill out forms! (His voice gets louder) She took everything out of my hands! For years! "Let it be, Rudolf, that's too complicated for you. I'll do it." (Pause, bitterly) She wanted me to stay dependent. And as an artist, I was unemployed. Completely dependent.

HILLARY (her voice sharpening): Then you should have LEARNED it!

Raoul stares at her. His voice becomes low:

RAOUL: You believe her. More than me.

Ruth takes a step toward him. Hillary as well. Their hands find each other—hold on tight.

RAOUL (sees their hands, his voice turns bitter): Of course. The two of you. He flips.

RAOUL (reads, calmly): "Hillary thinks Rudolf can never live alone. 'He is too damaged, Mama.'"

Hillary opens her mouth, closes it again.

RAOUL (flips): "Ruth is ashamed of Rudolf's dependency. 'A man his age...' She finds him embarrassing."

Ruth wants to say something, but can't.

RAOUL (closes the book, holds it, casually but firmly): You really said that. Not just her. You.

Silence. 10 seconds. Only the rain.

HILLARY (whispering): Raoul, I was frustrated—

RAOUL (interrupting, firmly): I know. Your diagnosis back then was right.

(Pause) I was dependent. I was weak. That's true. (He looks at both of them) But that's who I WAS. Years ago.

HILLARY: Raoul, we didn't want to—

RAOUL (his voice sharpening): Yes, you did. (He points to their hands) You stood here holding hands and analyzing me. Just like she did.

RUTH: That isn't fair—

RAOUL (indignantly): FAIR? You talk about triangulation. About manipulation. (Pause) And then you do exactly the same thing. You against me.

Silence.

RAOUL (his voice becomes calmer): I've lived in Paris for years. I work—I'm soon to be given an entire team. I pay rent. (Pause) But to you, I'm still the parasite from back then. (His voice becomes more determined) You don't see who I am NOW.

RUTH: We don't think that—

RAOUL (raises his hand): You just proved it. "He's an accomplice." "He should have learned." (His voice turns colder) You talked about me, not with me.

Silence.

RAOUL (goes to the hallway door, recipe book under his arm, upright): I'm leaving now.

HILLARY: Raoul, please—

RAOUL (turns around, calmly, with dignity): You don't see me. (Pause) You ally yourselves against me instead of with me against her. (He holds up the recipe book) You're dancing to her music. And you don't even notice.

RUTH (her voice breaking): The book—

RAOUL (interrupting): I'm taking it with me. You've drunk enough poison for today.

He walks out, back straight, head held high. The door clicks shut. Hillary and Ruth stand frozen. Three meters apart. Staring at the closed door. Silence.

Ten seconds. Only the rain. Ruth takes a step toward the door. Stops.

RUTH (whispering): What have we done?

No answer. Hillary stands motionless. The rain gets louder. Drums against the windows.

RUTH (panicked, to Hillary): He's coming back. (Pause, more uncertainly) He has to come back. Tomorrow. The apartment is being cleared.

Hillary does not answer. Just stares at the door.

RUTH (her voice growing lower, almost inaudible): Right?

Silence. Only the rain, louder and louder. Lights fade slowly.

CURTAIN

ACT 3

SCENE 1

Morning. Gray November light falls through the high windows. The rain has stopped. Silence. The table and floor lamps are still on from the previous evening—their warm glow appears ghostly in the daylight.

RUTH is lying on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket. Her face is puffy, her hair disheveled. After a restless night, she finally found sleep.

From the dark hallway leading to the bedrooms, the opening of a door is barely audible. The creak of floorboards. Then HILLARY steps out—freshly showered, hair combed, in clean clothes. She stops for a moment, seeing Ruth lying on the sofa. Silence. 10 seconds.

Ruth wakes up—a twitch, then she opens her eyes. Sees Hillary. Laboredly sits up, rubbing her neck.

HILLARY (softly): Did you... did you sleep?

RUTH (her voice hoarse): Hardly.

Silence. Ruth stands up, mechanically folding the blanket. Hillary watches, uncertain.

RUTH (without looking at Hillary): You showered.

HILLARY: Yes.

Ruth nods. Places the blanket on the edge of the sofa. Silence.

HILLARY (after a moment): Should I... should I make coffee?

Ruth goes to the kitchen, opens a cupboard. Stares into it.

RUTH: There isn't any.

HILLARY: What?

RUTH (turning around): No coffee. She used it all up.

Hillary comes closer, looks into the empty cupboard.

HILLARY: Oh.

Silence. Ruth closes the cupboard. Both stand there.

RUTH (softly, more to herself): Everything gets cleared out today.

Hillary nods. Both remain standing. Silence.

HILLARY: Where is he now?

RUTH: At the hotel, I assume.

Pause.

RUTH (sitting on a chair): We shouldn't have been so hard on him.

HILLARY (nods): He was so... distraught when he left.

RUTH: Do you think he's... (she searches for words) ...he's stable, isn't he?

HILLARY (hesitates, also sits down): I don't know. He was always... sensitive.

RUTH (her voice becoming worried): I hope he doesn't do anything stupid.

HILLARY: What do you mean?

RUTH (looks at Hillary): He was so desperate yesterday. And alone. In a strange hotel.

HILLARY: It's not strange. It's Berlin.

RUTH: You know what I mean. (Pause) He isn't good at... at handling conflict.

HILLARY (nods slowly): No. He never was.

Silence.

RUTH: We shouldn't have attacked him like that.

HILLARY: We didn't attack him. We were trying to help him—

RUTH (interrupting): Hillary, he left. With the book. That wasn't help.

Silence.

HILLARY (softly): I know.

Long pause. 15 seconds.

HILLARY (after a moment): She told me you were envious of my success.

Ruth looks up.

RUTH: She told me you thought I was the stupider of us two sisters.

Pause. Both look at each other.

HILLARY (her voice getting lower): Were you? Envious?

RUTH (struggling with herself, then): Yes. Sometimes. (Pause) And I admired you. And hated you. Because you escaped.

Silence.

HILLARY: I was envious of you.

RUTH (surprised): Of me?

HILLARY: Of your ability to... (she searches for words) ...to endure the shades of gray. My mind always looks for clarity, for perpetrator and victim. Once I've passed judgment, the file is closed. Final. But you...

RUTH: What?

HILLARY: You could see the monstrous in her and still come here every other day. You didn't like her, but you chose not to abandon her. You can reject someone and... hold them at the same time. That's a complexity I lack. I could only erase her and leave.

Silence. Ruth stands up, goes to the window.

RUTH: We never really talked to each other. Only about her.

HILLARY (nods): No.

RUTH: She was always between us.

HILLARY (her voice turning bitter): Even yesterday. When we... when we together against Raoul... (she breaks off) It was against him. Not for us.

Long silence. 20 seconds.

RUTH (after a long moment, looking out the window): When I was sick... with scarlet fever, I was eight... she made me bouillon.

HILLARY (looks up, surprised): Her "crystalline beef bouillon."

RUTH (nods, turns around): Simmered for hours. So clear you could see to the bottom of the cup.

Pause.

HILLARY: For me too. When I had the measles. (She smiles weakly)
Everything else was so heavy. Those thickened sauces, those dumplings. But the bouillon...

RUTH: ...was light. Almost transparent.

HILLARY: As if, for a moment, she had lost her stage directions.

Silence. 10 seconds.

RUTH (softly): That was her utmost. Her maximum of genuine affection.

HILLARY (nods slowly): Maybe it was genuine affection.

Pause. Ruth looks at Hillary.

RUTH: And I hated her anyway.

HILLARY (whispering): Me too.

RUTH: For everything else.

Long silence. Only the morning light.

HILLARY (after a moment): What do we do if he comes back?

RUTH: I don't know.

HILLARY: Do you think he'll come back?

RUTH: He has to. The apartment is being cleared today. At nine.

Ruth looks at the clock on the wall.

RUTH: It's half past eight.

Silence.

HILLARY: The book. He took it with him.

RUTH (her voice becoming urgent): I have to know what else is in there.

HILLARY: Ru—

RUTH (interrupting): I have to, Hillary. Fifteen years. Somewhere... somewhere there must be something good. About me. (Her voice breaks) It can't all... it can't all have been poison.

HILLARY (softly): What if it was?

Ruth looks at her. No answer.

HILLARY (after a moment): When he comes... every word from yesterday will still be standing between us. He'll be appraising us.

RUTH (nods): I know.

HILLARY: We have to... we have to be careful. With him.

RUTH (bitterly): Careful.

HILLARY: Ru, he IS at the end of his tether... You know that. We completely overwhelmed him psychologically yesterday.

RUTH (softly): Yes.

Silence. 15 seconds.

RUTH (her voice becoming panicked): What if he can't forgive us? What if he... what if yesterday we finally... (she breaks off)

HILLARY (softly): I don't know.

Long silence.

DOORBELL RINGS.

Both freeze. Look at each other.

RUTH (whispering): That's him.

HILLARY: Or the moving company.

RUTH: It's too early for the moving company.

Doorbell rings again. Ruth stands up, takes a few steps toward the door, stops. Her face shows panic.

RUTH (turns around to Hillary, her voice breaking): I can't. I can't face him... not after yesterday... not like this...

She looks around, panicked. Her gaze falls on her bag.

RUTH (quickly, to Hillary): I have to... I can't... I look terrible... I... I have to at least quickly brush my teeth.

She goes to her bag, fumbles for a toothbrush.

HILLARY (stands up, her voice becoming urgent): Ru, now?

Doorbell rings a third time.

RUTH (finds toothbrush, flees toward the bathroom): I'll be right back! Tell him... tell him I'll be right back!

She disappears into the hallway toward the bedrooms. Sound of a door being closed. Water runs (Off).

Hillary stands there. Stares toward the hallway where Ruth disappeared. Waits. Silence. Five seconds. Nothing. Only the water. Hillary looks toward the apartment door. Back to the hallway. Back to the door.

HILLARY (softly, hurt, to the empty hallway): Ru...

No answer. Only water running. Hillary stands motionless. Her hands tremble slightly. She clenches them into fists. Takes a deep breath. Straightens up. Turns toward the apartment door. Starts walking—hesitantly at first, then more determinedly.

HILLARY (half aloud, more to herself): I'm doing this now.

SCENE 2

HILLARY opens the apartment door. Silence.

HILLARY (surprised, almost disbelieving): Raoul.

RAOUL enters. Freshly showered, shaved, dressed neatly. He carries a coffee carrier with three cups and a bakery bag. The recipe book is under his arm. He is calm, composed, sovereign.

RAOUL: *Bonjour.*

Hillary stands there, her hand still on the doorknob. She stares at him. Her shoulders are tense, as if she were bracing for an attack. Silence. 5 seconds.

RAOUL (places coffee on the coffee table): *Du café.* I thought you two could use some.

He distributes the cups methodically, lays out croissants. Hillary doesn't

move. Blinks. Opens her mouth, closes it again.

HILLARY (softly, confused): You're...

She breaks off. Looks at him—his calmness, his upright posture, the coffee. Her shoulders relax slightly.

RAOUL (holds out a cup to her): *Prends.*

Hillary approaches hesitantly, takes the cup. Her hands tremble slightly.

HILLARY (whispering): Thank you.

RAOUL (looks around): Where is Ru?

HILLARY (hesitates): She... she's brushing her teeth right now.

RAOUL (nods, understanding): She was afraid to face me.

Hillary looks at him, surprised.

HILLARY (softly): Yes.

Silence. The water is running in the bathroom.

RAOUL (sits down, places the recipe book beside him on the floor): *Assieds-toi*, Hillary.

Hillary remains standing for a moment. Looks down at him. Then she sits—slowly, carefully, on the edge of the sofa. Raoul takes his coffee, drinks calmly. Leans back slightly. Hillary watches him. Opens her mouth as if to speak. Closes it again. Waits. Silence. 10 seconds. Hillary reaches for her own cup. Drinks as well. Looks at him over the rim. Raoul sets his cup down. Only then does he speak.

RAOUL: I needed the night. To think. About everything.

HILLARY (cautiously): About us.

RAOUL (nods): About us. About me. About her. (Pause) About what happened yesterday.

Hillary nods. Silence.

HILLARY (struggling for words): Raoul, what we said... it was—

RAOUL (gently raises his hand): In one respect, you were right. (He looks at

her) I was... *pas souverain*. Not sovereign. Years ago.

HILLARY: But—

RAOUL (interrupts gently): But that is the only version of me you allow. Everything I've built for myself in Paris, you ignore, because it doesn't fit your image. (Pause) You never visited me there, because you didn't even want to know who I've become.

HILLARY (softly, after a moment): We underestimated you. Not just your life there... but you.

RAOUL: Yes. You did.

HILLARY (after a moment, honestly): You have changed. I had hoped that you could free yourself from her, but...

RAOUL (interrupts): ...you didn't really believe it.

HILLARY (softly): No. Not really.

RAOUL (nods): I understand that. (Pause) You only saw what she showed you. The dependent son. The failure. (He looks at the recipe book) She fed you that. About me. About you. About all of us.

HILLARY (smiles): Triangulation.

RAOUL (nods): Yes. (Pause) But I am no longer in that system.

HILLARY (looks at him. Understands. Softly): No. You're not.

Silence. Respect between them.

RAOUL (after a moment): And you? Did you sleep?

Hillary looks up, surprised. Her hand briefly goes to her chest. For a moment, she says nothing.

HILLARY: I... (she smiles weakly) ...in my old childhood bedroom. Hardly.

RAOUL (nods sympathetically): It was hard, coming back here.

HILLARY: Yes.

Silence. 10 seconds.

RAOUL (softly): I came back because... (he searches for words) ...because we

have to finish this. Together. Not against each other.

HILLARY (nods): Yes.

Silence. Both drink coffee, relax. Short silence. The water stops. Silence. 5 seconds. Both listen. Short pause. Bathroom door opens (Off).

SCENE 3

RUTH enters. Her face is washed, her hair somewhat straightened, but she is still in the same clothes. Still battered. She remains in the doorway, seeing Raoul. Silence. 10 seconds. Her eyes fill with tears.

RUTH (whispering, her voice breaking): Raoul, I... I'm so sorry—

RAOUL (gently raises his hand, his voice warm but firm): Later, Ru. Drink first.

He points to the coffee. Ruth approaches slowly, sits down. She takes the cup with trembling hands. All three drink. Silence. Raoul takes a croissant, bites into it. Ruth drinks again, her hands trembling less. Hillary leans back slightly. 10 seconds. Only the sound of coffee, croissants, breathing.

RUTH (after a moment, her voice low, motherly): Did you... did you sleep?

RAOUL: Yes. At the Hotel Zoo. Good light. Good shower. (Pause) And time to think.

Silence. 5 seconds.

RUTH (her voice almost breaking): We didn't expect you to... we thought you were... we were so worried—

RAOUL (interrupts gently but firmly): You thought I would collapse.

Ruth and Hillary look at each other.

RAOUL (nods slowly): I know. (Pause) But my life today requires a resilience I have earned for myself. I carry responsibility now.

HILLARY (softly): Yes.

Ruth wipes her eyes. She looks at him—his posture, his calm. Her eyes widen. She sets her cup down, slowly, as if realizing something.

RUTH (softly, almost to herself): My God.

Silence. She stands up, not moving away from him, but taking a step closer.

RUTH (looking directly at him): This calm. This... precision. (Pause) You always had it. I had just forgotten.

Raoul looks at her, surprised.

RUTH (turns to the portraits on the wall, pointing): The pictures. (She walks quickly to one of them) I have to show you something... (she pronounces the name clearly) Raoul.

She steps very close to the canvas of the most recent portrait painted by Raoul. She squints and traces a line in the air with her index finger, without touching the paint, along the painted neck area.

RUTH (almost tapping the spot on the painted neck, her voice becoming firmer): You diagnosed her herniated disc years before the orthopedist did.

Raoul blinks. Hillary looks up, surprised.

HILLARY: What?

RUTH (to Hillary, pointing at the picture): Look at the cervical spine. This minimal guarded posture. C5/C6. (To Raoul) You painted it before she even knew she was in pain. Years before the first injection.

RAOUL (softly): I only painted what I saw.

RUTH (turns to him, nods briefly): That's just it. You stopped enduring her. You started reading her. (Pause) Reading the body. That is what good doctors do. Seeing what is already broken beneath the surface.

Silence. Raoul swallows, nods.

RAOUL (looks at the recipe book on the floor): We need to talk about this.

He picks it up, places it on the coffee table. All three stare at it.

RAOUL (after a moment): I discovered it yesterday morning. On the kitchen island. Before you noticed it.

Ruth and Hillary look at him.

RAOUL: I looked at it. Alone. (Pause) And I thought immediately... (he

hesitates) ...I wanted to *Mertz* it. Like Schwitters. (Pause) Cut it up. Reassemble it. Make something of my own out of her trash. Silence.

HILLARY (softly): A collage.

RAOUL (nods, his voice becoming more animated): Like Schwitters. (Pause) The concept would be simple. The pages—this ugly, cramped script—cut into strips. Deconstructing the sentences. (His hands move, precisely) Then recomposing them. By color, by rhythm, by visual tension. Detaching the words from their original context. (Pause) What was written as poison becomes form. Composition. Aesthetics.

He looks at the book, professionally, analytically—but his eyes shine.

RAOUL: The material is there. The transformation would work. (Pause, lower, more personally) And then I determine what it becomes. Not her. I take the control over her own words away from her. (Pause) That would be... (he searches for words) ...that would be true subversion. Revenge through beauty. (Pause. Takes a step back) But now I think instead— (points to the book) —

RUTH (interrupting him, her voice becoming urgent): Stop! You don't touch it! I have to know what else is in there. I have to finish reading it before you cut it up!

RAOUL: Ru, it's contaminated—

RUTH (interrupting): I don't care! You're not going to just shred our story. Fifteen years, Raoul. Somewhere... somewhere there must be something good. About me. (Her voice breaks) It can't all have been poison.

HILLARY (after a moment, she points vaguely at the recipe book): We shouldn't view this simply as trash. This is material. (Her gaze becomes searching, almost businesslike) In essence, this apartment is an archive. A complete record of how power works in a family and how it can warp a person from the inside out.

Ruth turns her gaze away. Her hand, which was still resting on the book, withdraws. Raoul leans back, crossing his arms. His look becomes skeptical.

HILLARY (makes a precise hand movement): If we don't read this book as a diary, but as a blueprint, the whole thing gains a value that goes beyond the three of us. It is a perfect manual on how power and control function behind closed doors. (Pause) Something can be made of this. A kind of warning system to recognize such games before they destroy everything—in other families, too. We take this heap of shards and build something useful from it.

RAOUL (shaking his head, slowly): No. I thought so too. But... no.

RUTH: Raoul, please—

RAOUL (his voice getting firmer): No. We leave it here. For the movers.

HILLARY: You can't just decide that—

RAOUL (interrupting): Yes. I can. And I am. (Pause) I've thought about it all night. Collage, transformation, art... (He shakes his head) That only gives her more power. Disguised differently, but power.

Ruth reaches for the book. Hillary hesitates, reaches as well. Raoul places his hand on it.

RUTH (desperately): I have to know!

HILLARY (rationalizing): It is a unique primary source—

RAOUL (his voice getting louder): It is poison! Pure poison! Whether you read it now, Hillary makes a study of it, or I make a collage—it remains poison!

All three hold the book. Silence. 5 seconds. Tension.

HILLARY (suddenly, not letting go, but pausing): Wait. (Pause) Do you hear us? We are arguing over her. Again. Over the book. (Pause) The book IS her.

Ruth and Raoul look at her.

HILLARY: Canetti writes that power is only complete when the ruler is dead—and the survivors still continue according to his rules. That is exactly what we are doing here. We are continuing her direction. As long as we labor over this thing, we don't let her stop. She is still feeding us with her madness, and we are even arguing over who gets to swallow the largest chunk of it.

RAOUL (nods slowly, his voice becoming calm, almost matter-of-fact): You're right. I wanted to make art out of it. (Pause, he looks at the book) But in doing so, I would have only provided the frame for her. I would have framed and signed her madness.

He loosens his grip on the pages.

RAOUL: We are treating this book like her will. Like her last, great work. But as long as I try to squeeze art out of it, I only make myself her curator. (Softly, bitterly) That would be her actual victory: that we still believe this garbage has meaning. In the end, it's just this.

He rubs his thumb over the paper.

RAOUL: Pressed wood. And ink.

RUTH (her voice trembling): For you, it's paper or a system. But for me... (She strokes the cover almost tenderly, then presses her flat hand hard onto the book, as if to feel the warmth beneath) For me, these pages are like her skin. I can feel both when I touch this. The love and the hate. The warm bouillon she brought me, and the knife she stabbed with. Both were real. That can't be analyzed away.

She pauses. Her breath is shallow. She stares at her own fingers, clutching the book cover, and suddenly recognizes her own grip.

RUTH (lower, as if to herself): But you're right. As long as I read in it, I'm waiting for her to belatedly allow me to leave. I'm looking for an apology she never wrote. (A dry, painful laugh) I'm holding her hand, even though it's been cold for a long time.

She jerks her hand back as if she had burned herself. She stares at the void on the table where her hand just was.

RUTH: I have to stop trying to patch the cracks. I have to just leave the wound open. Unhealed. (Her voice breaks) I have to... I have to let go.

She takes an uncertain step back from the table, arms folded tightly against her own body. The book lies on the table; none of the siblings touch it anymore. Long silence. Only the breathing of the three.

RUTH (looks at the book, her voice now firm): Out with it.

She takes the book from the coffee table, walks to the kitchen island, and sets it down there, in its original place. Determined. Final.

RAOUL: Out with it.

HILLARY (looks around, her gaze falling on the rug runners): Yes.

She goes over, begins to roll. Ruth joins in, helping.

HILLARY (rolling faster): Trip hazards. Everything that's in the way.

RUTH: Never again.

They place the rug against the wall. Raoul's gaze wanders to the portraits.

RAOUL: She's still watching us.

He goes to the first picture, takes it down. Hillary and Ruth follow.

Synchronized, ritualistic. One after another, they lean the portraits face to the wall. Bright spots remain on the wallpaper. The gaze of all three falls on the recliner.

RUTH: That too.

They go over. Raoul takes one armrest, Ruth the other, Hillary the back.

Together they push it against the wall. Determined. Deposed.

Ruth lets go. Her gaze falls on the walking stick lying on the floor. She bends down, picks it up. Holds it for a moment. Then she goes to the rolled-up rug, places the stick on it.

RUTH (softly): That too.

RAOUL (whispering): All gone.

They let go simultaneously and turn away.

RAOUL (goes to the window, looks out): From here, I always only looked inward. At her. At the canvas. (Pause) Now I see the city. People. Life.

Ruth and Hillary step beside him.

HILLARY (after a moment): Claire wrote this morning. She wanted to know how we were doing.

RAOUL: What did you say?

HILLARY (smiles weakly): That we are trying. Together.

RUTH: Are we?

Hillary nods; Raoul looks at her.

RAOUL: *Oui.*

Silence. The morning light falls through the window onto the three.

DOORBELL RINGS.

SCENE 4 (FINALE)

All three turn around. Look at one another.

HILLARY (walking to the door): I'll get it.

She opens the door. **WORKER 1** enters. About 50, experienced. He carries a large roll of gray protective fleece on his shoulder. Tucked into the bib of his overalls is a clipboard with a stack of multi-colored carbon copies, like a breastplate. **WORKER 2** follows him. Younger, carrying two stacked gray plastic bins against his chest; on top lie a roll of stretch wrap and work gloves. With his foot, he pushes a furniture dolly—a "dog"—over the threshold, its small casters making a hard, rattling sound on the parquet.

WORKER 1: Morning. Hartmann Moving. This the apartment for the clear-out?

HILLARY: Yes. Please, come in.

Worker 1 lets the roll of fleece fall to the floor with a dull thud.

WORKER 1 (looking around, whistles softly): Old building. High ceilings. Gonna be a long day. (To the siblings) You the relatives?

HILLARY: Yes. The children.

WORKER 1 (only now pulls the clipboard from his bib): My condolences. (Pause, then matter-of-factly) Right then. We clear everything out. Furniture, household goods, the lot. Junk removal or the charity shop, as discussed. (He looks around, notices the portraits and the recipe book) Just to be safe: No valuables? No family heirlooms? No keepsakes? Everything goes?

The three siblings look at one another. Then, simultaneously:

RUTH, HILLARY, RAOUL (together): Everything.

A brief silence. The worker nods.

WORKER 1: Understood.

With the papers in his hand, he looks around, walks to the recliner, and sits down in it. The three siblings freeze for a moment—watching the worker sit in Edgy’s chair, completely uninhibited. The worker flips through the papers on the clipboard, focused, practiced.

WORKER 1 (muttering): Liability waiver... where is... ah, here.

He finds the paper, stands up, and goes to Hillary.

WORKER 1: Sign here, please. So we’re not liable for... (reading aloud) ...any damage to walls, doorframes, and so on. (Flips a page) And here... (Pause) You confirm that after the clearance is finished, no further claims can be made for valuables, documents, or... (he reads haltingly) ...“objects of sentimental value.” Once it’s in the truck, it’s gone.

HILLARY (takes the pen, signs): Of course.

She hands the clipboard back.

WORKER 1: Thanks. (To Worker 2) Get started. Kitchen first.

Worker 2 goes to the kitchen, begins systematically and dispassionately clearing objects from the cupboards and the island into the gray bins—including the knife block and the recipe book.

WORKER 1 (to the siblings): We’ll have this done by evening. If you don’t want to stick around—

RAOUL: We’re leaving.

Worker 1 begins pushing furniture aside in the living room and laying out the fleece on the floor. A brief silence. Ruth and Hillary take their coats and bags.

RUTH (to Hillary): Do you have everything?

HILLARY: Yes.

RAOUL (seeing them both with their bags, then to Worker 1): We’re off

then.

The three go to the door. They stop briefly. They turn around, looking into the apartment one last time. Worker 2 is already carrying the first bin toward the door. The recipe book is clearly visible on top. The recliner stands against the wall. The rolled-up rugs. The portraits with their faces to the wall. Silence. 5 seconds.

RUTH (softly): Is that all?

HILLARY (nods): Yes.

RAOUL (after a moment): Come with me. (Pause) I want to show you something.

RUTH: What?

RAOUL: The *Hamburger Bahnhof*. The gallery. Contemporary art. (He smiles weakly) I've never been there.

HILLARY (surprised): You've never been there?

RAOUL: No. I always wanted to. But... (he breaks off) Will you come with me?

RUTH (looks at Hillary, then at Raoul, nods): Yes.

HILLARY (smiles): Yes. Let's go.

They step aside to let Worker 2 pass with the bin. Raoul remains in the open doorway for a moment. He looks back one last time—toward the window where he used to stand and paint.

RAOUL (softly, more to himself): *Au revoir*.

He exits. Ruth and Hillary follow. The door remains open. Worker 1 lays out fleece. Steps are heard on the stairs (Off)—Worker 2 is coming back.

The light lingers briefly on the emptying stage, the open door in the background. Then the lights slowly fade.

CURTAIN THE END